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ABSTRACT

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families, but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems. Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources, and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation; and coping skills. Implications of this model may be considered at these levels: (1) church leadership may seek to reduce stressors while providing resources to help families; (2) seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination; (3) workshops for those currently pastoring churches can emphasize that stress is a normative part of life and provide suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns; (4) written materials to minimize stress while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness can be published; and (5) diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and adaptation in ministerial families. (Author/ABL)

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Toward Understanding Stress in Ministers' Families: An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

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An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

Abstract

The paper presents an integration of the existing literature on stress in ministers' families, utilizing the Double ABCX model of family stress (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Based upon the Double ABCX model of family stress, particular ministers' families will vary in their ability to adapt to stressors based upon a variety of factors including: the particular stressor event; the family resources; the family definition of the stressor; the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition; the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships; the resources and support; redefinition of the situation and coping skills. Within the context of this model, issues specifically related to ministers' families are presented.

An Application of the Double ABCX Model*

Recent literature indicates that ministers' families face not only the normative developmental stressors of other families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982), but an additional set of stressors created by the interface between the family and the church systems (Lee & Balswick, 1989). This paper is designed to provide an integration of the literature regarding stress and coping in ministers' families within the framework of family stress theory (Boss, 1987; Hill, 1958; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

The Double ABCX model of family stress (see Figure 1) proposed that families vary in their ability to adapt to stressors (xX) based upon: the particular stressor event (a); the family resources; (b) the family definition of the stressor (c); the amount of family crisis resulting from the event, the resources and the definition (x); the pile-up of prior strains and current hardships (aA); the resources and support (bB); the redefinition of the situation (cC) and coping skills (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). In the following pages, summaries of issues for ministers' families are described according to each element of the Double ABCX model of family stress.

First, ministers' families face a variety of church, family, and individual stressors (Ostrander, Henry & Hendrix, 1990). These stressors include the normative developmental stressors for individual family members and for the family unit. Further, normative stressors occur due to the relationship between the church and family, resulting in occupational/family lifestyle linkages in ministers' families (Lee & Balswick, 1989). Normative stressors for church, family, and individual stressors among ministers' families are listed in Table 1, under "The Stressor Event". Further, ministers' families vary in their existing resources available to manage stressor events.

Examples of external and family resources for ministers' families are presented in Table 1 (see "b. Existing Resources"). In addition, variation in how ministers' families define stressor events is expected. Family stress theory proposed that the perceptions and meanings families attribute to stressors influences the degree of disruption a particular stressor creates for a family (Hill, 1958; see Table 1). Finally, the state of balance or imbalance a family experiences based upon the combination of the stressor event, existing resources, the family definition of the situation (x) results during the crisis phase (see Table 1).

As a ministers' family begins to make initial attempts to adjust to a stressor, many times a pile-up of stressors occurs. The pile-up may include attempts to deal with the inital stressor or other developmental tasks for the individuals or family unit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). See Table 2 for a summary of the church, family, and individual stressors that may result in a pile-up of stress (aA) as ministers' families attempt to manage stressors. In addition, during the adaptation phase, ministers' families call upon existing and new resources for dealing with the stressor. For example, new community or church-related resources may be called upon when family internal strengths are insufficient to manage a particular stressor. Table 2 details the new and existing resources that ministers' families may mobilize during stress (bB, see Table 2). Finally, as a ministers' family passes through the inital response to a stressor event, they may redefine the resources and previous coping attempts in new ways. Thus, the family establishes a redefinition or new perceptions of the stressor event, as indicated by cC on Table 2. Finally, during the adaptation phase, the ministers' family may utilize a variety of coping skills, some effective and some

ineffective, to manage the stressor. A number of coping patterns utilized by ministers' families are presented in Table 2.

Over time, the combination of the stressor event (aA), the family crisis meeting resource (bB), the definition of the situation (cC), the degree of crisis experienced (x), the pile-up of stressors (aA), the new and existing resources (bB), the redefinition of the situation (cC), and the coping patterns yields an overall effectiveness in the ministerial family response to a stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). The extent to which families effectively deals with a stressor has an impact upon the functioning of individuals within the family, of the family unit, and in the family-community fit (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). McCubbin and Patterson (1983) propose that families vary in their level of adaptation to stress, ranging from bonadaptation (i.e., individual, family, and family-community fit enhanced) to maladaptation (i.e., reduced individual, family, and family-community fit functioning). Consequently, ministers' families may be described as reaching a level of adaptation to stress over time. The level of adaptation has consequences for various family members (i.e., adults, adolescents, and children, see Table 3), for family integrity, and in terms of the family interface with the church. Ministers' families in a state of bonadaptation will experience enhanced development for individual family members, for the family unit, and a strengthened quality of relationship with the church. In contrast ministers' families who have difficulty effectively dealing with the stressors in this lifestyle are at risk for developmental problems within individual family members, for less effective family functioning, and for reduced effectiveness in the church-family interface.

In summary, ministers' families may be expected to vary in their ability to deal with normative individual and family developmental

stressors and with the stressors of the ministerial family lifestyle. The Double ABCX model of family stress provides a basis for examining elements in the process of managing ministerial families' responses to stress. This integration of ideas relating to stress in ministers' families and family stress theory provides a foundation for helping ministers' families to be strengthened, even when faced with stressors. Implications of this model may be considered at several levels:

(1) Church leadership (i.e., denominatinal leadership, local leaders) may seek to reduce the stressors emerging from policies and procedures within the church system, while providing resources (e.g., counseling or support services) to help ministers' families better manage stress.

(2) Seminary training and continuing educational opportunities for ministers and their spouses can emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and that the ministerial lifestyle requires a special type of family/occupational coordination that recognizes the stressors and seeks to maximize family and ministerial effectiveness.

(3) Workshops with ministers' families currently pastoring churches can also emphasize that stress is a normative part of family life and give suggestions for coordinating family and occupational concerns in a way that recognizes the stressors and seeks to increase family and ministerial effectiveness.

(4) Written materials available to ministers and their spouses covering normative aspects of stress, and written matter containing suggestions or helps in organizing the family and occupation in a way that minimizes this stress, while maximizing family and occupational effectiveness, can be published. Written material may be an

especially effective media for aiding ministerial families who feel unable to attend counseling sessions and/or workshops.

(5) Diagnostic tools can be developed for assessing stress and adaptation in ministerial families and their individual family members, so that when counseling is sought, appropriate measures will be used with these families.

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Table 1
Pre-Crisis and Crisis Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

a. The Stressor Event

Church stressors
1. Boundary ambiguity
2. Work schedule/timing issues
3. Mobility
4. Financial Strain

Family stressors
1. Family life cycle stage
2. Marital dyad relationship
3. Parent-child relationships
4. Parent-adolescent relationship
5. Extended family relationships

Individual stressors
1. Adult development issues
2. Child development issues
3. Adolescent development issues
4. Physical changes
5. Losses:
   health
   job (church or other)
   death in family
   divorce
   member runs away
6. Alcohol/drug abuse
7. Child enters/leaves school
8. Member gets new job

b. Existing Resources

External Resources
1. Congregational Support
2. Denominational Support
3. Community Support/ Resources (Counseling, financial)
4. Social Support networks

Family Resources
1. Extended family
2. Family flexibility
3. Family sense of humor
4. Family loyalty, commitment to each other
5. Family caring
6. Family sense of purpose in life
7. Family commitment to ministry
8. Financial assets
9. Open communication
10. Family strengths

c. Perception of stressor (a event)

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

Crisis (x)

The degree of imbalance a family experiences based on the stressor, level of resources and definition interacting

Table 2
Post-Crisis and Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

aA. Pile-Up of Stressors, Strains, and Hardships Church Pile-Up	Coping Patterns Family-Church Coping
Exhaustion from too much "positive stress"	
Excessive congregational expectations	Confrontation of family church member
Lack of privacy	Avoidance/ denial used to address problems
Insecurity-who is in the family and who is not?	Identify more with the ministry
Scapegoating family problems onto the Church system	Identify more with the family
Scapegoating church problems onto the ministerial family	Develop an identity separate from ministry
Long hours of ministerial-parent absence	Become more flexible
Ministerial commitments conflict with adolescent/child's activities (sports, plays, etc.)	Blame the church
Disrupted eating/sleeping from odd-houred calls/emergencies with the church	Blame the family
	Announce a definite work schedule & days off
Mobility issues: Loss of the familiar	The grieving process
	Take vacations
Adjustment to a new community 1.) New social contacts to be made 2.) New ministerial association	Redefine church people as part of the family
3.) Unknown community expectations	Develop social support in church
Adjustment to a new home	The grieving process
Adjustment to a new school	Access external sources of social support
1.) Peer group changes	Join a support group
2.) Academic changes	Meet with denominational leadership
Family secrets about family's actual financial situation	Trust in God
Out-of-pocket business expenses that are not reimbursed	Have faith
Lobbying for a pay raise and its social implications in the church system	
Embarrassment due to large income-gossip about this income	

Keeping up the pastoral image
Feelings of being victimized

Family Pile-up

Parent role overload-less access to the adolescent/child

Discipline/guidance concerns
Parental expectations of children
Parental hypocrisy seen in a negative light by children
Marital quality impacts
Marital conflict effects-inability to admit to marital problems or anger or negative emotions

Parental separation/divorce effects

Sibling relationship effects
Parent-child relationship effects: i.e., if ministerial parent abdicates parental responsibilities, other parent feels overloaded Jealousy, breakdown in trust
Inability to get marriage/family counseling

Carry over of stress from one family member to another

Communication breakdowns

Birth of a child, or other developmental stage stage issues close to a move or other major stressors

Excessive extended family expectations
Developmental milestones from several family members coincide (i.e., adolescent identity development with parents' midlife developmental tasks)

Family coping skills

Make plans to improve family devotions
Family uses denial/ avoidance tactics
Confrontation of family
Ask for counseling
Access social support and help from church members
Look for parenting help from extended family
Family abuse
Yelling
Try to talk problems
Hire help
Trust in God
Have faith
Defining the ministerial family lifestyle
Defining church people as the "enemy" to be overcome
Defining family as a priority
Talking with extended family about realities of ministerial lifestyle

Accepting change as inevitable
Develop family social competence

Individual Pile-up

Minister's stress carryover from work (female ministers may face stressors males do not)
Stress carryover from nonministerial spouse's job
Children's stress carryover from school
Child's feelings of ambivalence due to entering new school
Adolescent's stress carryover from school/work

Individual Coping Skills

Participate actively in a move
Alcohol/drugs used
Denial/avoidance
Develop high self esteem
Make plans to read Bible/ pray more
Prayer
Trust in God
Having faith
Acting out

Worry/guilt/anxiety
Self image concerns
Consequences of feeling alienated/ isolated
Identity problems may result in acting out, or high conformity and resultant problems
Alcohol/drug abuse
Side-effects of mental/emotional/ physical problems

Running away
Take a self-improvement course
Stress reduction activities
Confront a family member
Grieving process
Individual involvement in a move
Angry outbursts/cry
Assess one's own strengths & weaknesses
Giving up
Access social support
Seek counseling
Talk to school counselor
Talk to a teacher
Talk to parents/spouse

bB. Existing and New Resources

1. Any resources used before that are not depleted
2. New resources such as new knowledge of a community resource
3. Newly acquired skills of the family and its members
4. A better home, more privacy, better pay, etc.

cC. Definition of pile-up, resources, and coping attempts

1. Positive definition
2. Negative definition

Table 3

Adaptation Phases of the Double ABCX Model of Family Stress as Applied to Ministers' Families

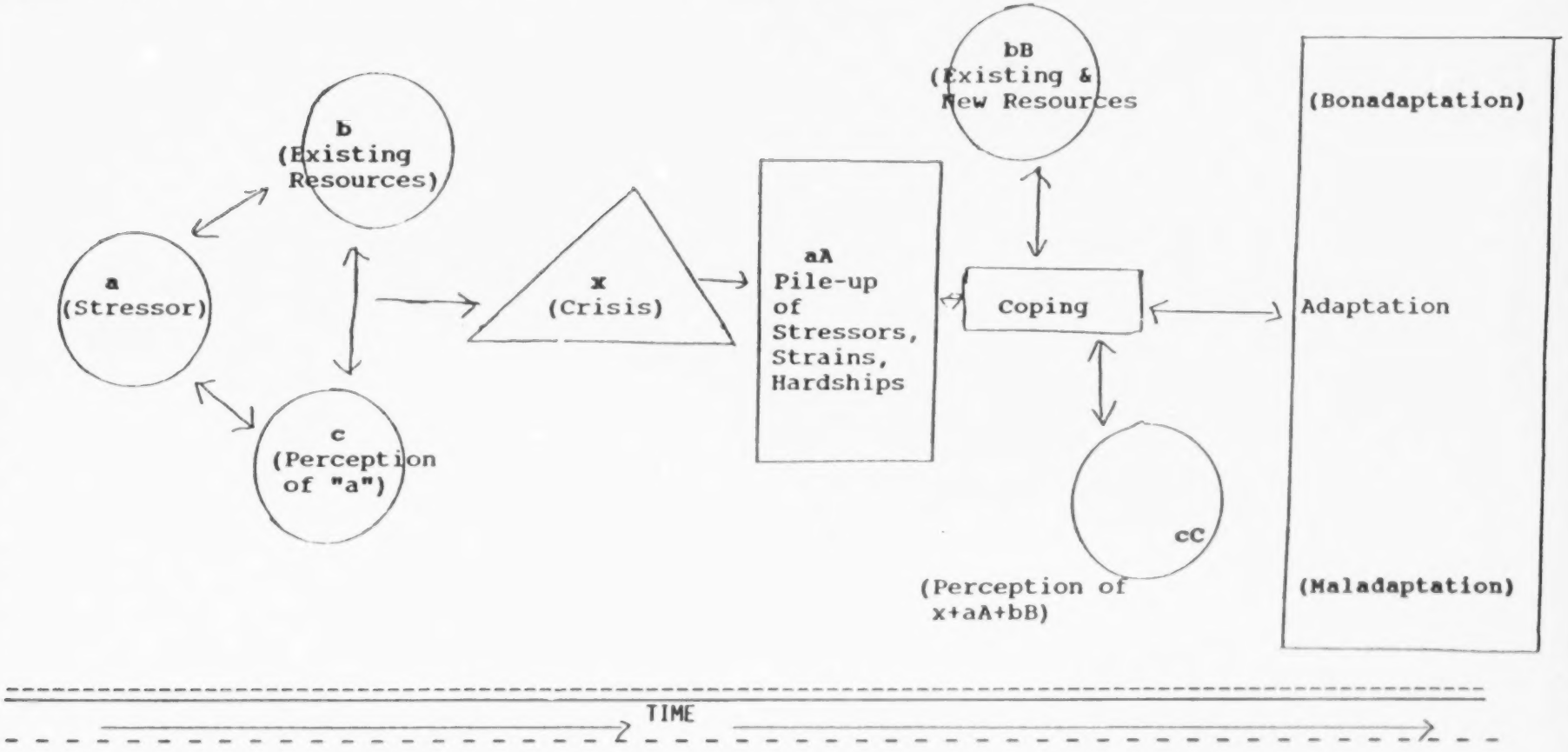
Bonadaptation	Maladaptation
Individual integrity enhanced:	Individual integrity threatened
Adult:	Adult
Healthy level of social competence/ability of the adult to get along in their social environment	Lack of social competence
High level of self esteem	Low self esteem
Balanced levels of conformity/ autonomy	Imbalance in conformity/ autonomy
Healthy sense of identity	Identify confusion
Good physical health	Failing health
Good mental health	Mental problems
Good emotional health	Emotional problems
Has a sense of purpose in life	Lacking purpose
Flexibility sufficient to allow an adaptable outlook on life	Rigidity or excess flexibility preventing adaptation
Bible reading and prayer life compatible with adult's needs	Devotional life not meeting needs
Behaviors consistent with beliefs	Inconsistent convictions and actions)
Ability to resolve individual stressors as they arise	Even small stressors not overcome
Resolving developmental issues in a timely fashion	Developmental issues not met adequately
Ability to access social support	Inability to access social support
Having a sense of belonging	Alienation/ lonelines over long periods of time

Adolescent	
Healthy level of social competence/ability of youth to get along in social environment	Difficult social relations
Active in a peer group	Lack of friends
Gradually increasing levels of autonomy and decreasing levels conformity	Inappropriate levels of conformity/ autonomy
Increasing positive sense of level of identity	Identity confusion
High self esteem	Low self esteem
Good physical health	Failing health
Good mental health	Mental problems
Good emotional health	Emotional problems
Has a sense of purpose in life	Lack of purpose
Bible reading and prayer life meeting individual needs	Bible reading and Not meeting individual needs
Enough individual flexibility to ensure an adaptable outlook on life	Not enough/too much flexibility
Resolving developmental issues in a timely fashion	Failure to address developmental issues
Having a sense of belonging	Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time
Ability to access social support	Lack of social support
Ability to resolve individual adolescent stressors when they arise	Inability to resolve even minor stressors
Child	
High child social competence /ability of child to get along in their social environment	Lack of social competence-evidence of not adapting to social environment
Functioning at their individual level in school	School problems
Good physical health	Failing health
Good mental health	Mental problems
Good emotional health	Emotional problems
Progressing through developmental stages in a timely fashion	Failure to progress in an adequate manner through developmental stages
Having a sense of belonging	Alienation/loneliness over long periods of time
Presence of a peer group	Lack of friends
Ability to resolve individual child stressors when they arise	Inability to resolve
Having a gradually decreasing sense of dependence upon parents but still well-tied to parents	Increased dependence/ premature separation from parental figures

Family integrity enhanced

Adequate levels of family social competence/ability of family to function as a family in its social environment	Family unable to function adequately in their social environment
Levels of flexibility that give the family the ability to adapt to change	Too much/not enough flexibility to adapt to changes
High level of family regenerativity	Low levels
A relationship with the church community (family-church fit) that is acceptable to the family	Family-church fit is not acceptable
A satisfactory sense of boundaries between family and church (i.e.,a sense of family identity separate from the church, as well as a part of the church)	Unclear boundaries Family identity poor or missing
A relationship with the broader community (family-community fit)that is acceptable to the family	Uncomfortable relationship with the Community
Family Bible reading and prayer compatible with family expectations	Unsatisfactory Bible reading and prayer time for the family
Healthy interaction between familymembers	Interactions among family members that may be harmful to the family or individual family members
High levels of positive communication between family members	Low communication levels, or high levels of negative
High sense of family loyalty, caring, trust in family	Lack of family loyalty, caring, trust
A balance between church commitments and family commitments that is satisfactory for all involved	Imbalance between church and family commitments

Figure 1. The Double ABCX Model: A theoretical perspective on stress in ministers' families.



*Adapted from McCubbin, H. & Patterson, J. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX model of adjustment and adaptation. Marriage and Family Review, 6, 7-37.